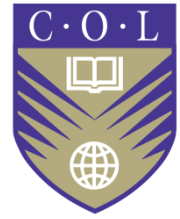


Learning for Development: What kind of development? What kind of learning?



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Introduction

I warmly welcome to Canada those of you who have come from abroad. Although I am a relatively new resident of Vancouver, it is a pleasure to welcome to this lovely city and to British Columbia both those from overseas and also those Canadians who live in those parts of this country that know what winter is.

My task is to set the stage for this meeting, of which we expect great things. The title of this workshop, which COL calls an 'institute' just to confuse everyone, is Open and Distance Learning for Development: The role of ODL in delivering MDGs. In order to unpack the topic I have entitled these remarks Learning for Development: What kind of development? What kind of learning?

Our purpose at this institute is to come to a deeper and more operational understanding of the links between learning and development and then to determine how open and distance learning can strengthen those links. I should perhaps have added to my title 'what kind of open and distance learning' because that is a matter of confusion and debate as well. I'll touch on that too.

I begin by stating the obvious. There is a link between learning and development. By and large the more that the citizens of a country have learned, the more developed that country is. People need to learn across a broad front and the categories articulated in the Delors Report: learning to be, learning to know, learning to do, and learning to live together serve to define that breadth.

I used the words 'by and large' in describing the correlation between learning and development because the correlation is far from perfect. The United States seems to get by quite well with a school system that is only an average performer in international terms. On the other hand jurisdictions like Cuba, Sri Lanka, and the Indian state of Kerala are widely admired for their educational attainments but do not seem able to

exploit those attainments to achieve greater prosperity than their more ignorant neighbours. We should note, however, that while people in these three places are not noticeably more prosperous, they do have greater life expectancy and better health than their less educated neighbours.

However enthusiastic we may be about education we must therefore recognise that whilst it may be a necessary condition for development, it is not sufficient by itself. I was in Kerala recently. People in the state were upset that the next-door state of Tamil Nadu, with a less-educated populace, had just won the bid to house a major Nokia manufacturing plant. The press explained that the politics of Kerala were just too complicated.

This was reinforced when we drove back into Kerala from Tamil Nadu. Just before the border our driver pulled into a service station and filled up with petrol, rocking the vehicle from side to side to get every last drop in the tank. I asked him why and he said, 'You always fill up before you go into Kerala because you never know when the gas stations will go on strike'.

In the case of Cuba it may be a combination of Marxist economics and the American boycott that prevents prosperity being commensurate with education. In Sri Lanka the failure of Sinhalese and Tamils to learn to live together harmoniously may have something to do with a disappointing economic performance.

It is not my intention, however, to argue by example. I shall begin by examining the concept of development then look at the role of learning and end with some remarks about the contribution of open and distance learning

What Kind of Development?

First then, what kind of development? The title of Amartya Sen's inspiring book *Development as Freedom* provides the best starting point. He argues that development and human rights are two sides of the same coin and he defines development simply as the process of expanding the real freedoms that people enjoy.

He gives two reasons why freedom is central to the process of development.

The first is an evaluative reason. For Sen the central criterion for the assessment of progress is whether the freedoms that people have are enhanced. I shall ask what these freedoms are in a moment.

His second reason has to do with making development happen. He argues that it is primarily through the free agency of people that development is achieved. Free people devote more energy to the development of their communities and their countries than those who are not free.

So according to Sen the expansion of freedom is both the primary end and the principal means of development.

What kinds of freedom? The Millennium Development Goals state these freedoms implicitly. First, there is freedom from hunger. You cannot concentrate on much else if you worry constantly where your next meal is coming from. Hunger is a direct manifestation of poverty. Taking people out of abject poverty helps to free them from hunger and gives them other freedoms as well, notably some freedom from being pushed around by others and from having most of life's decisions made for them.

The freedoms that come with release from abject poverty, notably the freedom to make more decisions about one's life, can better be exercised with some education and training. Education, leading to various ways of using literacy, gives people greater freedom to communicate and interact with their environment. Training, leading to diverse skills that are the basis for livelihoods, gives people greater freedom as economic actors.

The third MDG aims at equalising the freedoms of men and women, first through parity of access to education and then through parity in the outcomes of education.

Three MDGs are concerned with freedom from disease: freedom from dying in infancy; freedom from dying while giving birth; and freedom from avoidable diseases like AIDS, malaria and polio. Clearly, freedom from abject poverty is a start towards achieving the health freedoms. We are also increasingly aware that the freedom to be educated and trained is also helpful in attaining the freedom of better health.

Then there is an MDG about the environment: the freedom to live with a minimum of dirt, smoke and germs. There is a paradox here. In rich places like Vancouver individual people consume more than their share of the earth's resources but live in a nice clean environment with fresh water in the taps, clean air to breathe, and no piles of garbage to trip over. In developing countries individuals make fewer demands on resources but often have to live besides heaps of garbage, breathe foul air and make do with dirty water.

The final MDG, number eight, seems like a congeries of leftovers. It is something of a let down after the clarity of the other goals. Goal 8 refers to freedom of trade, good governance, more aid, special attention to landlocked states and islands, decent work for youth, affordable drugs, and public private partnership to increase the availability of information and communications technology. After the clarity and focus of the other MDGs it is a disappointment.

Here is where the Commonwealth comes in. The MDGs were the outcome of the largest ever meeting of heads of government ever held at the United Nations. Their Millennium Declaration, which included the MDGs, had to be a consensus document. Since many UN member states are not democracies there could not be an MDG about political freedoms. Talk of good governance was as close as they could get to this key issue.

The Commonwealth has no such scruples. Democracy is a condition of membership of the Commonwealth and countries have to leave the Commonwealth if they cease to be democratic. Both Nigeria and Pakistan had to leave for this reason but both are now back. Zimbabwe left of Mr Mugabe's own accord before it was pushed.

Strengthening democracy and governance is the Commonwealth's most significant work and when the Commonwealth of Learning talks of development as freedom it gives a central place to political freedom. Indeed, although the MDGs are mute about democracy, people involved in development attach increasing importance to the role of democracy in furthering development. This takes us back to Sen's view that development is achieved through the free agency of people.

It is becoming clear that decentralising power, so as to allow people to act as free agents at the local level, is a powerful driver of development. For example, the drive towards education for all in India started to take off when the management and funding of schools was decentralised to the local councils - the panchayats.

Even in democracies, both developing and developed, governments resist giving power to the people, whether it be through genuine local government or by allowing community radio stations. However, governments are coming around to the realisation that the risk of empowering the people has to be taken because it is the surest route to development.

What kind of development? What we want, of course, is sustainable development. We can interpret this in two ways, both important. The first is development that is sustainable in the environmental sense, namely development that ensures that the use of resources and the environment today does not restrict their use by future generations.

The second, more prosaic interpretation of sustainable development is simply development that continues. I mean development projects that do not peter out when funding is withdrawn. I mean innovations that do not wither on the vine when the equipment breaks down. Some years ago development people talked a lot about 'the culture of maintenance' and I find that an important concept. Indeed, I sometimes think that the key determinant of whether a country is developed or developing is whether equipment and systems are maintained.

The Commonwealth of Learning is a tiny organisation and it is not a funding body. For us it is very important for the developments that we facilitate to be sustainable in both senses: they continue after we have gone and do not benefit today's generation only at the expense of tomorrow's generation. Indeed, because we are small and can act in only a limited number of places our ambition goes beyond mere sustainability. We want our initiatives to be self-replicating, by which I mean that the ideas and processes are so obviously powerful and successful that others adopt them spontaneously.

What Kind of Learning?

So much for development. I now ask what kind of learning? What kind of learning supports development by cultivating the freedoms that define development and the freedoms that drive development?

Such a broad understanding of development clearly calls for a broad understanding of learning. Indeed, as COL increasingly focuses its work on the MDGs we interpret learning increasingly broadly. Our splendid name, the Commonwealth of Learning, encourages us to go in this direction too. Learning is the common

wealth of humankind and our task is both to increase that wealth and, as far as possible to ensure that it is the common wealth of humankind rather than the private preserve of favoured individuals or institutions.

Examples of the learning that is needed spring readily from the MDGs as I have outlined and interpreted them. Freedom from poverty and hunger requires learning in the villages and rural areas of the world. People there need help to articulate a vision of a better life and then identify the information about producing food and sustaining their environment that they need to achieve that vision. Means are then needed to facilitate their learning.

Freedom from avoidable disease and excessive infant and maternal mortality is improved by better health services. Much, however, can be achieved if people learn some simple things about hygiene and disease avoidance. If everyone washed their hands five times a day the health of the world would be transformed. The challenge is that there are a lot of people in the world. How do we reach them?

Although these two examples lead us in the direction of informal or non-formal learning, formal schooling remains the keystone of the system. COL calls one of its programmes School Development because schools - good and effective schools - are crucial centres for learning in all communities; learning not just by children but by the whole community. As technology plays an increasing role in learning schools have a new function of housing technology for use by the whole community.

Learning at all levels and on all topics will be facilitated by strong schools and good teachers, even if much learning takes place outside the schools. To give an example, all countries are making it a priority to improve the technical and vocational education and training (TVET) that takes place in their schools. In fact, much of the training that people need to improve their livelihoods takes place informally outside the schools, but this informal learning for livelihoods will be better and more extensive if the formal system of TVET is functioning well. Schools have a very important trickle-down effect that can develop and strengthen the channels for informal learning.

In all these examples we are talking about learning for adaptability. Human adaptability, which is grounded in continuous learning, is the key to sustainability. It is not enough for farmers to learn to grow a new crop. They must learn to recognise when it is time to diversify from that crop to something else. It is not enough for people to learn to avoid a single disease; they must learn a culture of wellness. It is not enough for people to learn to install equipment; they must learn to maintain it and recognise when it needs replacing. It is not enough for children to learn the national curriculum; they must learn to learn.

What Kind of Open and Distance Learning?

These examples show that the challenge of development, which is the challenge of expanding the freedoms that people enjoy, is fundamentally a massive challenge of learning. The challenge is huge. There are four billion people living at the bottom of the world economic pyramid. Conventional methods of teaching and learning, however flexible and effective they may be in the right context, simply cannot address the scope and scale of the challenge.

In most areas of life technology has made it possible to address such challenges of scope and scale. Products and services that were once the preserve of the rich are now so much cheaper and so much better that they are available and attractive to the masses. The huge challenge of development requires that we now apply technology to learning. That is the reason for COL's existence. Our fundamental task is to help countries, institutions and individuals to use technology as a means of expanding and improving learning.

By technology we do not simply mean electrical and electronic devices with coloured lights. We mean the whole technological approach that applies knowledge and skills to practical problems and includes basic organisational principles like division of labour and specialisation.

Unfortunately we have a problem of nomenclature and anyone who can help us with that problem will be my friend for life. You could say that COL's business is technology-mediated learning, but that sounds at best like jargon and at worst like gobbledegook to most people. Because of this we usually employ the term for the most successful manifestation of technology-mediated learning, namely open and distance learning or ODL.

The problem is that competition in nomenclature is an irritating feature of the effervescent endeavour of applying technology to learning. In recent years new terms have filled the air like confetti: eLearning, virtual learning, flexible learning, blended learning and distributed learning are just a few of the terms that are used to describe attempts to use technology to enhance the scope and scale of learning. Few pause to define the terms or distinguish between them, but all pretend that their preferred term represents the height of modernity and all the others are old hat.

COL does not purvey a particular technology but simply tries to help countries and institutions integrate technology into education and training so as to increase the scope, scale and quality of learning and teaching. I guess that we have to live with the cacophony of terminology as best we can, trying always to use the term that is most likely to make our purpose understood with a particular audience.

COL understands, of course, that competition helps to drive the application of technology forward. However, an important part of our role is to be a catalyst for collaboration. An important new manifestation of that role is our commitment to open education resources. We believe that that the combination of accessible and adaptable learning management systems for eLearning with learning object repositories that make a rich array of re-usable learning objects readily available is a major advance.

This combination has tremendous potential for the developing world. We are enormously impressed by the speed that some African institutions are showing as they take advantage of these new possibilities. This combination gives a new meaning to the statement that learning is our common wealth. It also brings closer the day when the central proposition of COL's founders might become a reality. That proposition was that: "...any learner anywhere in the Commonwealth shall be able to study any distance teaching programme available from any bona fide college or university in the Commonwealth".

For the last 18 years that statement has been a dead letter. However, in this era of open education

resources it could become a reality. The Virtual University for Small States of the Commonwealth, which Ministers of Education have asked us to create, could be a way of putting this principle into practice.

Conclusion

It is time to conclude. My subject has been learning for development. What kind of development are we seeking? We want development that increases human freedom on many dimensions. The condition for developing those freedoms is a massive increase in human learning. Conventional methods of teaching are not up to the task. COL has the opportunity to help countries and institutions use technologies in order to rise to the challenge. We look to you to tell us how we can most effectively take advantage of that opportunity.